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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000237

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SUBJECT: IS AN N-K SETTLEMENT DEAD? EVERYONE POINTING
FINGERS

Classified By: DCM. A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Official Yerevan remains careful not to close the door on the possibility of a settlement in the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while opposition politicians and thinktankers appear almost gleeful in what is being widely reported as a breakdown in the talks at Rambouillet. Most importantly, the presidential administration and the Foreign Minister (septel) are at pains to emphasize Armenia's willingness to continue negotiation. End Summary.

BLAMING AZERBAIJANI INTRANSIGENCE...

¶2. (SBU) Interviewed by "Hayots Ashkhar," a pro-government tabloid, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Tigran Torosian (a member of the Republican Party and part of the governing coalition) called on international organizations to end their long-running policy of equating Armenia with Azerbaijan after the failed summit. "This would help to broaden their room for maneuver and to take steps against the party which is dragging out the negotiations," he said. If not, "there will hardly be any real possibilities of settling the Karabakh conflict in the near future." Oppositionist daily "Aravot" continued to muse, "One may wonder why the West is not exerting pressure on Azerbaijan to accept the Rambouillet variant of a settlement. This might have happened had we been even half a step ahead of Azerbaijan in terms of being a democratic and civilized country. But because the leaders of the two countries are displaying the same authoritarian mentality, it is meaningless to expect any privileges (from the international community)." The paper claimed that the peace deal discussed at Rambouillet could serve as a "basis for sound mutual compromise. But as was the case at Key West (in April 2001), the Azerbaijani side proved unprepared to take the decisive step towards peace."

¶3. (SBU) On February 13, the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Defense and National Security, Mher Shahgeldian (Orinats Yerkir, part of the governing coalition) spoke out saying he didn't think that the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement had reached a deadlock. Commenting that, "It's obvious that the process will be continuous," Shahgeldian expressed a willingness to see international peacekeepers deployed in the conflict area, noting that "we should accept this proposal if it positively affects the process."

...AND A LACK OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

14. (SBU) Former Foreign Minister Aleksandr Arzumanyan (and opposed to the current administration) commented February 13 that an N-K settlement remained elusive because both Aliyev and Kocharian "lack domestic legitimacy" and neither leader has held a presidential or parliamentary election recognized as democratic by the West. "That is the reason why there will be no progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process as long as they remain in power." In a February 15 interview, opposition leader Aram Z. Sargsyan commented on the high expectations surrounding the Paris talks that were not realized, "The expectations were groundless. First of all persons that have undertaken to solve such a painful issues must have the corresponding inner force, they have to be bright individuals, and be accepted by the society. Neither Robert Kocharyan, nor Ilham Aliyev have the inner force to solve this issues and to present it to the society. Neither do they have the desire or the possibility. Both strangle democracy in their countries." Sargsian noted further that he couldn't comment on whether "agreement has been achieved only on seven issues out of the nine discussed, saying that "Nobody can say whether this corresponds to reality, as the negotiations are held in strict secrecy, and the presidents do not make any statements."

PRESIDENT "VALUES HIS TIME"

15. (C) Responding to Armenian press reports commenting that Azerbaijani Presidential Office staffer Mamedov had claimed that "Robert Kocharian left the negotiations in Rambouillet unfinished," Armenian Presidential spokesman Viktor Soghomonyan provided a sharp rejoinder in an interview

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February 14. Soghomonyan told reporters that "In reality, on February 11 in Rambouillet, the Armenian President proposed that they summarize the talks when it became evident that no results would be achieved. Robert Kocharian values his time and does not take an imitation of negotiations seriously, not even to prolong his stay in beautiful Paris." (Note: Armenian press reports had previously cited various reasons for Kocharian's early return to Yerevan, including the death of Minister of Defense Serzh Sargsian's father-in-law, although Embassy employees spending February 12 at Kocharian's favorite winter resort spied the President skiing and snowmobiling. End Note.) As the Presidential Spokesman continued to comment on reports of Mamedov's statements, he said, "I do not want to make any judgements about their (the statements') aims. The signs of bad upbringing of a mid-level official are evident, however, as he allows himself to comment on the actions of another country's president."

COMMENT: TRYING TO SHIFT "BLAME," KEEP DOORS OPEN

16. (C) Clearly stung by a series of press reports that portray President Kocharian as the one to "walk out" of the recent talks in Rambouillet, along with renewed attacks from some of the more credible opposition thinkers (claiming that Kocharian could never make a deal because of his lack of political legitimacy) the Presidential Administration has begun to launch a small PR counter-attack. Governing coalition partners in the National Assembly (with the exception of the ARF-Dashnaks) have also lent their voices to a "glass-half-full" interpretation, and certainly the Foreign Minister has weighed in as well. Nonetheless, with no real information about the talks except for the acknowledgement that no agreement was reached, comments and speculation among the general population are generally conforming closely to previously held positions. The GOAM appears to want to avoid taking any blame for what some quarters are portraying as "failed talks," and to leave the door open for potential

future progress on resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue,
whether in the near- or long-term.
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